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ABSTRACT

Traditional concepts of speech ethics are based on either "national value" or "formula value" theories. The national value theory asserts that the ethical standards by which a speaker and a speech are evaluated must reflect established societal mores. The formula value theory delineates a set of rules for the student to follow in the process of persuasive speaking. Both theories suggest general guidelines that are difficult to apply to specific speech situations. In view of the problem inherent in teaching speech ethics with either of these orientations, the student should be encouraged to develop his own standards of ethical speaking. These standards should evolve and develop from peer group discussions. The ethical rules thus established should be rigorously tested by the instructor's criticism of the speaker and by peer group criticism. (EE)

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A SUGGESTION ON METHOD:

THE ETHICS OF PERSUASION IN THE BEGINNING SPEECH COURSE

Richard L. Lanigan

Scholarship soon reverts into a form of theoretic eclecticism when an attempt is made to provide a "brief" account of either ethics or persuasion. Yet again, the academician who undertakes to offer an abbreviated statement of an ethics of persuasion is viewed with appropriate scepticism. Similarly, one who wishes to offer a method of teaching values in discourse is adjudged to be at the summit of the undefinable falling toward the valley of obscurity. This essay is an attempt to stand fast, to suggest a method of how to teach ethical persuasion in the beginning speech course. No attempt is made to state what ethical persuasion should be.

First, traditional concepts of what should be taught in the area of ethical persuasion can be viewed with a suggestion about the impracticality of teaching the "what" of ethics. Second, a methodology is suggested whereby a knowledge of ethical persuasion can be evoked with the student being taught how to judge, rather than what is susceptible to judgment.

I

A traditional position among speech scholars concerned

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with ethical persuasion is the concept that an over-all ethic or "natural value" will suggest what is ethical and not ethical in discourse. Rogge, for example, states that "in a democracy the standards of value by which a speaker and a speech are evaluated must be standards established by society."[1] The widespread acceptance of this attitude or a very similar one is indicated in the survey conducted by Jensen. One of his major conclusions in the study of recent literature on ethics in persuasion is that "there is a decided emphasis on national values as the source of ethical standards."[2]

In brief, the "national ethic" or national value theory is to be reflected in the classroom as that which is acceptable or proper to the socio-economic context surrounding the speaker, speech and audience. Ambiguity is surely the watchword of this theory to teaching. The relative success of a correlation between the national value and the value that is reflected in a given student speech soon reflects an obvious difficulty for the instructor. The speech teacher soon becomes the "victim" of his own teaching, for the student (as indeed many of us) will find some example of the "national value" to support his own (and often misguided) value judgments in a persuasive speech. This is to say, a theory of "national values" can justify any type of speaking. Rationalization becomes preferable to reason

and moral choice. The question of what is ethical or unethical speech becomes at once academic and non-directional in the classroom.

The shortcomings of the "national value" theory are assailed from a different point of view by Haiman.[3] He suggests that even granting the existence of a knowable national value, or as he calls it, "the democratic ethic," persuasion cannot be a proper subject for the speech classroom. Haiman indicates that the basic American values of fair-play and free consent obviate the place of persuasion in a democracy. This is to suggest that the "national value" is fixed. The result is that any use of persuasion distorts or misuses the "national value." Persuasion per se is unethical. The effect of Haiman's analysis upon the classroom situation is clear: persuasion is not to be taught. Thus for Haiman, the question of how to teach ethical persuasion is moot.

A second tradition in the realm of teaching speech ethics relies on a "formula value." This is to say, a set of rules is delineated for the student to follow in the process of persuasive speaking. One of the earliest and more simple of the formulae is by Schrier.

> 1. Be sincere, do not lie; do not stimulate a feeling which is not genuine; be yourself persuaded of the course to which you would persuade others;
>
> 2. Do not appeal to base motives and prejudices.[4]

The basic timelessness of Schrier's statement is reflected in a comparison with a more recent formula. Minnick offers the following guidelines for the student speaker wishing to be ethical in persuasion.

1. It is unethical to falsify or fabricate;

2. It is unethical to distort so that a piece of evidence does not convey its true intent;

3. It is unethical to make conscious use of specious reasoning; and

4. It is unethical to deceive the audience about the speaker's intent.[5]

The general use of the "formula value" as cited in the examples above is also widespread. As Jensen reports, "most authors try to give positive and helpful hints as to what a conscientious persuader might use."[6]

One classroom drawback of the "formula value" approach to teaching persuasion is the negative attitude it assumes. The formulae tend to describe what is <u>not</u> to be done in general terms. Yet, there always seems to be the exception that is not covered by the "rules." Schemata of conduct tend to cover too little. The student soon finds difficulty in ascertaining what <u>he</u> should consider to ethical or not.

In many cases, the general formula rules have little relevance to a particular problem in the speech of persuasion. For example, what is the cut-oof point for evidential detail

in support of a main point in a speech--realizing that omission may be unethical, yet a time restriction necessitates some omission? In short, the "formula value" inevitably reduces ethical concepts to such general guidelines that particular problems just cannot be resolved by a reference to the "rules."

What then is common, in a problematic sense, to both the "national value" and the "formula value" theories of teaching ethical persuasion? First, both theories attempt to explain what is unethical instead of determining why a practice is ethical or not in a given time and place. Second, both theories suggest general guidelines that are difficult to relate to specific problems in a given speech situation. Third, it is difficult, if not impossible, to teach the student how to test his speech ethically because of the problems enunciated in the two previous conclusions.

II

In view of the problems dealt with in the preceeding paragraphs of this analysis, several suggestions can be made concerning the teaching of ethics in persuasion. First, the student should be encouraged to develop his own standards of ethical speaking. Second, these standards should evolve and develop in group discussions with his peer group. Third, the ethical rules thus developed should be rigorously tested

by (a) the instructor's criticism of both the techniques of the speaker and the effects of his speech, plus the consistency between the two, and (b) by peer group criticism. Fourth, the student should reformulate his ethical criteria for speaking according to his own observation of its shortcomings in the persuasive speech situation. All of these suggestions can be usefully taught to the beginning speech student. Nilsen's observation seems appropriate: "Class discussions of ethical principles and their application to speaking and listening is, of course, essential. There must be constant evaluation of the fulfillment of ethical obligations."[7]

Student discussion groups could be presented with materials that reflect both the "national value" and the "formula value" theories of ethical speech. From this base, the discussion could proceed to determine how each individual should judge between the ethical and unethical in speaking. At this stage, each student would construct criteria for judging ethically the material and reasoning processes of speaking persuasively. The student criteria could be based upon an aspect of social utility, "democratic" values, Truth, or so on. What the ethic is to be, is not so important as the fact that the student evolves it himself for his needs. Obviously, this process can lead to student "sophistry" which might be an amoral or even non-moral role

for persuasion. That is, anything the student wished to say would be called "ethical" for him. Thus, a further teaching requirement must be called forth so that the weaknesses inherent in the "ethical" system can be pointed up.

The student should be allowed to give one persuasive speech that is rationally and materially reflective of his ethical criteria for persuasion. This student speech should the be subjected to a critical review by the instructor. The teacher's analysis could be presented in the form of an extemporaneous reply speech or it could follow the traditional post-communication commentary pattern. In any event, the instructor's criticism should be geared to the "ethical" effects (the student's value system viewed as a societal operant) and geared to the techniques employed by the speaker (the action matched against the volitional code). Alas, considerable moral fortitude may be required of the teacher in the process of his critique!

The instructor's criticism should be tailored to contrasting the student's ethical formula to the other value theories not encompassed by the student's view. That is, if the student's persuasive speech reflects a social-utility ethic, the instructor may argue from the point of view that assumes a "democratic value," a "Truth value," or any other ethic or combination of ethical approaches. The purpose to

be served is the demonstration that a student's ethical concepts must be geared to the group or larger society to whom the persuasion is directed. In a pragmatic sense, the student's speech will not be persuasive if it conflicts with the mores or ethics of the audience to a significant degree. Thus, the instructor can function as that "audience" that would be unsympathetic to the student's ethical views, i.e. unreceptive to an ethical emphasis perceived as sophistic.

On the other hand, the peer group should be allowed to criticize the student's persuasive speech on ethical grounds. Again, this procedure may be accomplished in a number of ways. Two methods that this author has found successful are: (1) A student may reply to another student on a given topic, or (2) the class may offer criticisms on a more informal basis. In both cases the instructor must emphasize that criticism be limited to the ethics assumed in the speaker's presentation of material and argument. This type of peer group criticism is generally sympathetic to the speaker. The critique may not be stringent enough to indicate that the speaker's approach is generally narrow and inoperable in the wider audience of non-students, or perhaps in another student group. Precisely for this reason, it is important that the instructor also play a critical role in the student's experience with ethical speaking.

In short, the criticism of a student's ethical concept in persuasive speaking should be subjected to sympathetic and unsympathetic review. Once this process has been completed, the students should again return to the discussion group format. The reformulation or modification of individual speech ethics could then be accomplished. Hopefully, a richer and fuller concept of the personal speech ethic would evolve in the student's understanding of persuasion as a social force. This process can be culminated by having the student make an overt commitment to his value system by making each student write a brief essay specifying his ethical code.

Obviously, the above four step proposal can be repeated with successive persuasive speeches depending upon the student needs and the time requirements of course material. Now that the teaching method is laid out, the conceptual justification of the methodology can be offered.

III

In the four step method suggested above, the speech instructor has the task of teaching his students <u>how</u> to judge the ethical nature of persuasive speeches. <u>What</u> ethical base the student should ally himself with is a secondary question and is left to the student to ascertain. It is assumed in this teaching plan, that a student al-

ready has some moral orientation whether deeply religious or generally humanistic, whether formulated or not, when he enters the course. It really does not matter what the student's ethic is, as long as he has one. However, the important fact to remember is that the student's ethic will be carried over and related to the speech theory and skills being taught in the fundamentals course. Of course, a primary learning experience is the challenge to the ethic that each student will experience.

A second practical result of the four step method is the integration of the discussion group and platform experiences in the ethical process of communication. Formal and informal situations provide different contexts of expression and perception for the student ethic to operate in. The joint criticism by the instructor and the peer group should allow for a sympathetic and an unsympathetic appraisal of the student's ethics in persuasion. Additionally, the student receives two levels of post-communication: the professional insight of the instructor and the unorthodox (initially) perceptions of his fellow students.

A fundamental presupposition of the methodology offered herein for teaching ethical persuasion is that the instructor prepares the student as a good listener in addition to preparation as a speaker. This is to say, the student must be a good critic for his own benefit and that of the other

students. The student must be able to distinguish the ethical problems of evidence and reasoning in his own speaking as well as in other speeches. This point is made quite emphatically by Stevenson.

> In many cases there is so close a wedding of persuasive and rational methods that no little discernment is needed to distinguish them. Practice in making this distinction is mandatory; for whether one wishes to use persuasion or avoid it, to accept it or resist it, one must recognize it for what it is.[8]

In the context of Stevenson's remark, it may be pointed out that the methodology suggested by this writer allows the student to practice making distinctions on ethical grounds. The student receives individual practice in giving his own speeches and group practice in evaluating others from his ethical point of view. It would appear that such a method closely approximates the "reality" of the speaking situations that the student is likely to encounter in the future, whether at college or after graduation. In this respect, the student comes to realize that "there is no goal which can be called morally right speech; there is only a constant striving to do better."[9]

The over-all purpose of the methodology offered in this essay is best summarized with appropriate emphasis by Ewbank and Auer.

> Each speaker must answer immediately to his own conscience, and eventually to those whom he leads or misleads.
>
> No code can be legislated or imposed to relieve the listener of the duty of analyzing the speech and deciding for himself what constitutes valid proof and a legitimate appeal to the emotions. Familiarity with the methods commonly used in persuasive speeches should constitute a valuable part of the listener's equipment for this important task.[10]

Two points are made in the above quotation that are of critical importance to an instructor who teaches persuasion in a beginning speech course. First, the speaker's ethical standards must be his own, not those of the instructor or the textbook. For, if these later sources are demanded of the student little learning will take place and much teaching will be futile. A student has a set of moral alternatives when he enters the classroom. The instructor's goal is to relate those standards to speech in general and persuasion in particular.

Second, the student's role in the speech classroom is primarily that of a <u>listener</u>. Usually, he will spend two or three times (if not more) as much time exercising his listening ability as he will speaking. Thus, it is up to

the instructor to provide (1) the tools of ethically examining speech communication and (2) the relationship between the ethical positions of the student speaker and his audience.

IV

Now, it is appropriate to review the four point methodology for teaching ethical persuasion with its corresponding benefit to the student as either speaker or as a listener. First, the student as an individual is asked to formulate an ethical code for use in persuasive speaking. This formulation or orientation is based solely upon the ethic the student brings into class as his behavioral experience. Second, the student is placed in a discussion group armed with his persuasive ethic. The interchange among the students allows the individual to modify, strengthen or otherwise adapt his point of view as he deems appropriate. Then, the student incorporates these ethical principles into the speech building and delivery processes. In addition, he observes others speak while engaged in the same process. Fourth, the student functions as either a critic or an observer of the instructor's criticism.

Significantly, at each level in this process of discovering and formulating an individual ethic the student functions in two capacities. As a speaker first and then

as a listener. The roles are always demanded whether in the platform situation or during the interaction of group discussion. In any event, the student must develop an ethical theory of persuasion by learning to adapt and modify his views and the audience view into a shared common ground of conduct and discourse, if you will, a shared ethic. As instructors, we can teach the student how to ethically persuade--this is our goal.

FOOTNOTES

1. Edward Rogge, "Evaluating the Ethics of a Speaker in a Democracy," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLV (December, 1959), p. 420. Cf. Franklyn S. Haiman, "Democratic Ethics and Hidden Persuaders," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLIV (December, 1958), pp. 385-392. See Ernest G. Borman, "Ethics of Ghost Written Speeches," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLVII (October, 1961), pp. 262-267.

2. J. Vernon Jensen, "An Analysis of Recent Literature on Teaching Ethics in Public Address," Speech Teacher, VIII (September, 1959), pp. 226-227.

3. Franklyn S. Haiman, "A Re-examination of the Ethics of Persuasion," Central States Speech Journal, III (March, 1952), p. 7. See Hugo E. Hellman, "The Man with the Gray Flannel Mouth," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLIV (February, 1958), pp. 56-60.

4. William Schrier, "The Ethics of Persuasion (A Defense of Rhetoric)," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XVI (November, 1930), p. 480.

5. Wayne C. Minnick, The Art of Persuasion (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), p. 284.

6. Jensen, op. cit., p. 227.

7. Thomas R. Nilsen, Ethics of Speech Communication, "The Bobbs-Merrill Series in Speech Communication" (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966), p. 88. See R. T.

Oliver, "Ethics and Efficiency in Persuasion," Southern Speech Journal, XXVI (Fall, 1960), pp. 10-15.

8. Charles L. Stevenson, Ethics and Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 140. See Robert Redfield, "The Difficult Duty of Speech," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIX (February, 1953), pp. 6-14.

9. Nilsen, op. cit., p. 88. See C. D. Broad, Five Types of Ethical Theory (Paterson, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams, and Co., 1959).

10. Henry L. Ewbank and J. Jeffery Auer, Discussion and Debate (2nd ed; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1951), p. 258. See Henry N. Wieman and Otis M. Walter, "Toward an Analysis of Ethics for Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLIII (October, 1957), pp. 266-270.